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Department of Sociology, University of Southern California

RURAL COMMUNITY LIFE IN THE HAUTE MARNE

BY

ERNEST G. BISHOP, A.M.

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RURAL COMMUNITY LIFE IN THE HAUTE MARNE

By ERNEST G. BISHOP, A.M.*

1. *Introduction.*—There is no region in western Europe so rich in historical association as that valley which is drained by the river Marne. Not less important than the victories of Tours and Chalons in saving France and the liberties of free nations from the blighting menace of invading and destructive hordes stand the triumphs won at the first and second battles of the Marne. That name is woven permanently into the fabric of history. Upper Marne River, having its source in the Department of Haute Marne, also drains historic ground. At a time when France was a wilderness and without roads, warriors navigated this stream and fought along its banks. At Langres, near

EDITOR'S NOTE: The author of this study was born in Hastings, England. At the age of eight months he came to the United States.

Mr. Bishop received the degree of Bachelor of Arts from the University of Southern California in June, 1915, and the degree of Master of Arts from the same institution one year later. He was married to Miss Florence B. Hight, R. N., of Los Angeles on December 19, 1917, in Tacoma, Washington.

Mr. Bishop entered the service of the United States Army on October 3, 1917. He was in training in Company A, 348th Machine Gun Battalion at Camp Lewis, which was often spoken of as the best trained and most efficient unit in Camp. Mr. Bishop left Camp Lewis on June 25, 1918, for overseas duty and arrived at the village of Poulangy, situated among the hills about fourteen kilometers from the American headquarters at Chaumont. After two months of intensive drill, the 348th departed for the front lines and reached a position in reserve on September 22. Three hours after the Battalion went into action on September 26, Mr. Bishop was severely wounded. Both limbs and the left arm were broken, and twenty-one shrapnel wounds were suffered. In a remarkable article entitled "How it feels to be shot," in the San Francisco Bulletin for March 22, 1919, Private Bishop reports that he has twenty-one souvenirs of the battle of the Argonne. "I collected altogether twenty-one of them (shrapnel), all fortunately in the arms and legs." Private Bishop says that after the 77 had bursted with a terrific roar, "My ears rung with a sharp, metallic din, my head buzzed and for a fleeting second I questioned whether I was dead or alive. In fact, my inner consciousness seemed to insist that I was dead."

He left France on January 20, 1919; reached New York, January 31; and arrived at Letterman Hospital, San Francisco on February 14, where he is at present writing (April 15, 1919), in the charge of the reconstruction aides. In a letter. Mr. Bishop says, "I have no regrets whatever, for I was crippled in the greatest crusade, the most righteous cause that mankind ever undertook."

The first draft of this monograph was made in France while the author was a hospital patient.

the source of this stream, Caesar subdued one of the native tribes. And battles have been waged and counsels have been held along this watercourse during the great conflicts of western Europe, from the time of Caesar's invasion until the present day. Thus, a study of a region so favored with a historical background and of its inhabitants whose mode of living is so utterly alien to the modern world to which we are accustomed is full of interest, especially since France has been the storm center of the Great War and her deeds of valor and might have won the admiration of the civilized world.

2. *France a Rural Nation.*—France is a country still in the agricultural stage of industry. More people live in the country than in the cities, a condition largely due to Napoleon's agrarian reforms, by the provisions of which small holdings were parceled out to the citizens as an inducement to remain on the soil and to build up a sturdy peasantry. Thus, instead of a few large estates there are many small farms. An idea of their number may be gained by recalling the fact that the average size is seventeen acres. As a result of this agricultural prominence national life has a strong rural trend. Designs upon coins and engravings upon currency represent chiefly pastoral scenes—the sowing of seeds and the harvesting of ripened sheaves. The Department of Haute Marne is a representative district of rural France.

3. *Topography.*—Haute Marne is a region of unsurpassed scenic beauty and pastoral tranquillity, untouched by the blighting desolation of the recent war. The predominant features of the landscape are a continuous series of forest-clad hills with intervening valleys, green with vegetation, through which streams move leisurely on their journeys to the sea. Hard-packed stone roads, bordered by rows of tall poplars, follow the course of the valleys and wind their way over the hills. Rainfall is abundant; the soil is well adapted to agriculture. Hence this region is ideal for dairying and general farming.

4. *The Rural Village.*—The rural village consists of a group of buildings of varied age and architecture which are clustered along narrow and crooked streets. They are built entirely of stone and roofed with tile. Houses set amid lawns, flowers, and

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shrubbery are seldom seen. Each dwelling abuts closely upon the street; the only yard consists of a small plot in the rear confined within garden walls. As in the case of the congested areas of our large cities, the street is the playground of youth. Children share the village square with geese and poultry. Ideas of beauty and even the rudiments of neatness and order are entirely lacking. Heaps of barnyard refuse and bits of agricultural implements often litter the dooryards, and even the main streets are not free from trash and filth. Plumbing is unknown; the water of the village fountain quenches the thirst of man and beast alike. The same roof shelters both the farmer and his livestock. A door often leads direct from the living room to the stable. The existing sanitary conditions can easily be imagined.

The farmer is a town dweller; he does not live upon the soil he cultivates. Generally there is a small garden adjacent to the house; the main holdings lie outside the village. This custom of living in groups is undoubtedly a survival of unsettled times when all people lived within walled towns for the purpose of mutual protection against roving brigands and other persons of hostile intent.

5. *Industries.*—As stated in a preceding paragraph, agricultural methods are decidedly primitive. The cultivation of land in strips, a scheme employed in England five hundred years ago, is common. The chief crops are potatoes, hay, oats, and wheat. These are planted in alternating strips in the same field. Crop rotation is not closely followed. The farm wagon consists of a huge, clumsy, two-wheeled cart drawn by one or more horses in single file. It is not an uncommon sight to see an ox, donkey, and horse hitched to a plow in a single file. Even milch cows, in the stress of abnormal times, are pressed into service as draught animals. The methods of harvesting and threshing grain are antiquated. Although in a few instances a reaper or binder of American manufacture is used, almost all the grain is still cut with a "cradle," a device employed by the American farmer before the advent of modern agricultural machinery. After the sheaves are gathered the fields are hand raked, and often the scattered straws are gleaned by hand. The labor of the field is a family activity, youths, women, and old men toiling together.

This situation is largely due to war's toll of man-power. If the head of the household is so fortunate as to secure a *permission* during harvest, he will be found in the field with his family. The most modern threshing device is a machine which mangles the sheaves and pours grain, chaff, and straw together on the barn floor. Horses furnish the motive power for this crude implement by means of a "sweep." The common practice is to beat out handfuls of the grain against a board, and to separate kernels from chaff by utilizing a favorable wind.

To view the activities of the field recalls Millet's paintings, "The Angelus" and "The Gleaners." One who has studied these paintings has gained some idea of the subject under discussion.

Next to agriculture, dairying is the most important industrial occupation. Nearly every household possesses two or three cows and a few milch goats or sheep. All lands are unfenced; hence when cattle are driven afield they have to be watched lest they stray into the growing crops adjoining the meadows. It is not unusual to see elderly women knitting as they keep watch over their herds, or gathering the fragments of harvest—scattered wisps of grain which they place in a basket strapped to their back. In many cases sheep and goats are pastured in common. Every morning the village *berger* appears in the main streets with his dog. At a blast from his horn-whistle the flocks are released from their pens; immediately they rush out in the street. Shepherd and dog gather the various flocks together and drive them out to pasture among the hills. Each night shepherd and flock return, the latter dispersing unaided to the various quarters.

Pasturage is plentiful; the heavy rains make certain a heavy growth of meadow grass. Hence dairying is important as a means of supplying such articles of diet as butter, cheese, and milk to the household, especially at a time when the resources of the entire country are drained heavily in order to meet the burdens of war.

Another mode of livelihood is the manufacture of steel products for foreign trade, chiefly with South America. These manufactures include scissors and pocket knives of many sizes and designs. Judged by the price of our machine-made goods the

cost of these articles seems excessive; but beauty of design, artistic workmanship, and durability somewhat compensate for the high cost. The workman is more an artist than an artisan since he performs every step in the process of making his articles of sale; and he attains complete mastery of his craft by life-long application with the same kind of tools and materials. He is not obsessed with the modern factory idea of maximum output in a minimum of time; neither is he burdened with rush orders. Moreover, he is his own master and is free from the necessity of constantly having to increase his output in order to keep his job. Again, he labors under his own roof and owns the tools of production with which he works. His standard of living calls only for the necessities of life. Social aspiration and social pretension are alike alien to his nature. Hence he is under no compulsion to work at fever heat in order to keep up appearances or to pay for luxuries. Thus, relieved from the pressure of speed strain and of economic stress, he is able to give undivided attention to the labors of bench and forge, and to work leisurely and carefully as many hours each day as he desires. The hours of labor and the conditions under which it is performed approach closely the idyllic dream of some of our socialistic critics of modern industrial life.

The family is the economic unit of French rural life, each household supplying the majority of its own needs. There are very few transactions in which money is involved except in the sale of manufactured goods. The farm, the garden, and the herds supply the family with food. The cost of dress is negligible since social life is limited to church functions. In many instances the rural dweller combines the labor of shop and farm, a practice which recalls the medieval guild whose members were required to assist in the harvest fields.

6. *Recreation.*—We have read of the social life of the various European Capitols—the gaiety and glitter, the bright lights and the great white way, the brilliance of court functions, the assemblage of wealth and wit, the murky, mysterious demi-monde as well as the myriad activities that will bear the light of day—in fact a kaleidoscopic variety of amusements and diversions to suit all classes and to satisfy the most fickle and capricious taste. This picture is descriptive especially of Paris which is acknowl-

edged the leading city of Europe in fashion, social life, and care-free gaiety. In striking contrast stands the rural village which is utterly devoid of any form of amusement whatever. A moving picture in the villages of Haute Marne would cause more excitement than the return of the *poilus* from the Front, for the people have long been accustomed to wartime conditions. Secular diversions are pitifully few. In the village wine shops a few kindred spirits may be found mellowed into convivial sociability by some pleasing vintage. In the community washhouse the housewives meet with their baskets of clothes. As they kneel in rows along the scrubbing stones they exchange a few words of neighborly interest. But the amount of time given to mere gossip, as we understand that term is negligible, for there is too much work to be done in home and field. The nearest approach to a social center is the village *ecole* and the *mairie* in which a few gatherings more political than social are held.

Points of social contact with the outside world through the media of books and papers are few. Newspapers are scarce. Almost all news from the world at large is received in the form of a *communiqué* which is read aloud by the town crier. First he beats on his drum to call the attention of the people of the surrounding neighborhood. Immediately groups gather in the doorways and windows are flung open from which heads are thrust, every one listening intently. It is unique to think that the great majority of villagers received their war news in this way. After completing the reading, which is done in a rapid sing-song voice, the crier taps his drum and then moves away, to another street.

Rural Haute Marne is predominantly Catholic. The village church with its stained glass windows depicting scenes from the life of the Saviour, the Virgin Mother, and the Saints, with its ivied walls and high towers suggests peace and repose as well as strength and solidity. Many of the churches date their origin from medieval times. Some of the towns sprang up from Convent Communities which flourished in rural places hundreds of years ago. Evidences of their existence still remain—religious houses and decaying walls covered with ivy and creeping vines. Most of the niches in the walls are vacant; in a few, saints and martyrs still keep vigil over crumbling masonry and grass-grown gardens in which cattle now graze amid the ruins of farming implements and other debris. Outside the few secular diversions mentioned, there exists in the church whatever surcease may be found from the humdrum routine of constant toil. Church days and saints days, days of weddings and funerals are golden

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milestones in the lives of the people; and in honor of these occasions the drab attire of labor is exchanged for the one costume in which the owner will ultimately be laid away beneath the shadow of the churchyard walls.

7. *The New Day*.—The coming of American troops to billet in the rural communities of Haute Marne marked an epoch in the lives of the native population. Instead of being quartered together in one building the troops were scattered about the village, a few here, a few there, in attics, in lofts, in basements, wherever there was room. As a result of dividing the soldiery into small groups social contact with the villagers became firmly established. By degrees America, the mythical, the land of fabulous wealth, became less a strain upon credulity and more of an established fact. Eagerness to learn the language on one hand and native politeness and hospitality on the other worked together for the securing of friendly relations. Especially was this true in regard to the children. Being more approachable and quicker to grasp the meaning of the ideas of the newcomers, the children became the media of communication between parents and troops. To furnish diversion and entertainment for their hosts the battalions frequently gave programs consisting of athletic feats, songs, and music in the village square. During these gala occasions the entire population was present, all keenly enjoying the novel situation. The American private soldier with his dollar a day is looked upon as the real *nouveau riche*; his money freely spent in the village shops adds greatly to the income of many people living on a precariously narrow margin previous to his arrival.

8. *Family Life*.—The chief characteristic of family life is its stability. Marriage which is planned and carried out by the parents, the family doctor, and the *curé* is a social collaboration. This term also applies to family activity. All work together in the garden, the stable, and the field, constituting a harmonious and well-ordered labor unit. Due to a war status of industry nearly all of woman's work lies outside the home. Early and late, women of all ages and conditions toil at tasks often beyond their strength, silently and with ox-like patience. Still, no unrest is evidenced; no complaint is voiced. To keep the hearth warm and the fields cultivated, to share in all sacrifices, to rear their offspring, to care for refugees and orphans, in short to carry on at home as loyal and patriotic soldiers of the second line of defense—these are the tasks to which they have wholeheartedly devoted themselves.

9. *Conclusion*.—The fact should be borne firmly in mind that this study deals with the abnormal situation incidental to war times. To judge the French people and their customs, man-

ners, and mode of living correctly we must bring a full measure of charity, sympathy, and understanding to bear upon the subject. France has indeed suffered burdens grievous to be borne. All her young men are dead; her fertile fields, a desolate waste. Wars have decimated her population and ravaged her territory since times immemorial. The drain upon man-power and resources has been appalling. Lying adjacent to a ruthless enemy who covets her mines and fields her position has been so insecure as to keep the people in a constant state of suspense. Even in peace times a large standing army is imperative. Not only are these men taken from productive industry but also the labor of many others is required to support them. With frontiers as secure as ours, with all energies and resources turned to internal development and the productive pursuits of peace, France would be an unusually rich and progressive country.

Again, the French have the old world type of mind, adhering closely to custom and convention. "They are far more conventional, because an older people than we. In the United States men are always on the move. It is rare for a father and his children and grandchildren to follow the same pursuits or even to live in the same town. In France the great opportunity is not to do something different, but to continue doing well what was begun a hundred years ago. The American motto is "Get On!" The French is "Stand Fast!"¹ France, smaller than Texas, supports a population of 40,000,000. To survive competition and to live comfortably there must be an intensive pursuit of livelihood. No one can afford to move from town to town or to change occupations at will. There are no broad, virgin acres awaiting settlement, no cheap lands to support a constantly moving farming class, so extensive as to respond productively to surface cultivation. The limited home-acres must be tilled deeply and intensively. "The tremendous and inevitable rivalry in business, and in the liberal professions, forces the French to perfect themselves in one branch rather than to dabble in many. It makes them prefer security to risk. The people who love risk begin by emigrating. Those who love security stay at home."²

Thus a people rooted deeply in the soil and lacking contact with progressive ideas are somewhat impervious to innovation and change. But American capital and machinery will do much to put agriculture upon a more modern and productive basis. Greater than material aid, however, is the influence of progressive ideas in regard to those things which make life truly worth while—sanitation, housing, living conditions, recreation, and social betterment. A brighter and a more perfect day is about to dawn for those valiant defenders of freedom whose motto is, "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity."

1 B. Van Vorst, *France Our Ally*, pp. 4, 5.
2 *Ibid.*, p. 5.